Riding the Airwaves to Save a State

How three New Orleans stations are battling crime and corrupt officials

By David Chandler

By the nature of the industry, a television station is primarily an entertainment service. It therefore tends to have a show-business-oriented management; you put on a show to get the business. But seven days a week, at certain hours, the station steps out of its show-business role and becomes a news organization with all the ethics, responsibilities and independence involved therein. When a station steps further out of its basic show-business role to do crime-busting investigative journalism, one begins to wonder. Why do they do it? Quite understandably, neither stockholders nor station managers consider public service their most urgent responsibility. And investigative journalism is costly—reporters often spend weeks to get a three-minute film—and risky, in terms of slander actions and advertiser repercussions.

But in New Orleans, the three largest TV stations have gone into muckraking reporting in a big way and with big social results. Furthermore, they've done it so adeptly that there have been few slander actions and no law-suit losses, and advertisers have responded to the higher ratings.

The flap instead has come from politicians and bureaucrats, who, almost as a body, resent the enterprise and the results of the TV journalists in New Orleans. They call it "destroying confidence in government," and there is reason for their embarrassment. For the past four years, the stations have been doing the watch-dog job that, were things as they should be, might otherwise be expected from government agencies and newspapers. Thus far, the TV exposes have led to the trial and conviction of the state attorney general; indictments against 11 other major officials; the calling of four separate Federal grand juries to churn out new indictments; and a climate which last November saw Louisiana voters conduct and win their first reform election since 1940.

The television stations responsible are WWL, WDSU and WVUE, the CBS, NBC and ABC affiliates, respectively. They've stood virtually alone as public defenders in a state where, with three exceptions, the newspapers are notoriously timid; and in a state where some office-holders are so bad they'd steal pennies off a dead man's eyes.

Indeed, in one of the recent exposes, WVUE's investigative reporter Richard Angelico reported just that: someone in the coroner's office was stealing money and valuables from corpses before they were turned over to relatives. It had been going on for years and amounted to many thousands of dollars. Two employes were dismissed and a third was arrested on theft charges.

And at about the same time, another scandal involving dead people was broken by WWL's Bill Elder. Tipped off about a seemingly routine divorce case, Elder learned that the defendant—a private attorney who also functioned as the city inheritance tax collector—had been paid some $560,000 in the last eight years from the estates of dead people as his fee for administration. That part of it was legal. Elder further transfixed his audience, however, by reporting the defendant's testimony that he couldn't pay alimony on his large income. Why? Because he kicked back virtually 90 per cent to the politician who got him his job.

What followed was Standard Operating Procedure in investigative journalism. The accused politicians flatly denied that any such testimony ever took place. And the presiding judge locked up the trial transcript on the grounds that it was secret. And for a while it looked like the usual case of the politicians' word against the reporter's. But then, after media pressure, the judge released the testimony and it was all there. Spelled out in names and amounts of money.

The results were immediate. A strong movement has begun to abolish the inheritance tax collector's office in the next legislative session and the kickback charges are being pursued by the office of the New Orleans district attorney, Jim Garrison.

The Garrison aspect in itself made a story, because most corruption charges in Louisiana are investigated by the U.S. Justice Department and rarely by the state or a district attorney. (One says "rarely" to be generous; the truth is, *almost never* prosecuted by the state. Several DAs and sheriffs continue in office despite Federal indictments. A rural district attorney remains in office despite a Federal felony conviction, as did the state's highest legal officer, the attorney general, until his term expired in May. The end result can be considered democratic: felons prosecute felons. Jim Garrison—a member of this Alice-in-Wonderland asylum—is under Federal indictment on a charge of taking bribes from gamblers.)

In an oblique and certainly unintentional way, DA Garrison is partly responsible for investigative TV journalism in New Orleans.

The beginning was in the summer of 1967, when Garrison was moving full throttle on his investigation of the John Kennedy assassination. Even in that early period, several newsmen already were convinced that his conspiracy case was largely based on false testimony; and that his arrest of businessman Clay Shaw was cynical and without justification.

Nevertheless, the city's media—TV and radio stations, and newspapers—refused to interfere. The reason was fear. Fear that the DA would hit them with legal action. Fear that he would cut them off from his Big Story. Fear that he, the state's most powerful poli- →

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tician, who sometimes even gave orders to the governor, would arouse the public against them. And fear that they might possibly disrupt the assassination case—many of them believed in it and were therefore willing to allow end results to justify the means.

The sole exception to the local media's timidity, the one organization that didn't tuck its tail and grovel for Garrison's handouts, was television station WDSU, privately owned by the philanthropic Stern-Rosenwald family. That station would learn, however, that the fear of Garrison was well-placed.

In collaboration with NBC, the station's investigative reporter, Richard Townley, was assigned to dig into the Garrison case and determine what was true and what was false; and, equally important, to learn whether the DA was steam-rollering the civil rights of Clay Shaw or others.

Townley and NBC's Walter Sheridan interviewed many of Garrison's so-called key witnesses, including convicts who admitted—on sound film—that they had been coerced into perjury. Other information came when Garrison's chief investigator abruptly resigned and took a suitcase of copied documents to Sen. Robert Kennedy in New York and warned him that the Garrison investigation was a fabrication. The result was an hour-long *NBC White Paper* which exposed and criticized the DA's conduct—the first such criticism to appear in a New Orleans medium.

Garrison retaliated promptly by causing the indictment of Townley and Sheridan on charges of "intimidating" witnesses—charges which, from a press-intimidation point of view, proved effective. Townley, under the onus of a felony charge, no matter how unfounded, was taken off investigative work and soon thereafter left New Orleans, thereby removing a thorn from Garrison's side. NBC's Sheridan was less severely harmed, but nevertheless his national travel movements were restricted until the indictments were dismissed in Federal court three years later. In the meantime, it was learned through Senator Kennedy's office that prior to the documentary's appearance on the air, Garrison had assigned men to manufacture a case against Townley and Sheridan or—failing that—to beat them so badly they'd abandon their story.

To repeat, the intimidation tactic was effective. For nearly a year Garrison and other powerful politicians were handled with care by the New Orleans media, with the sole exception of the bloodied WDSU, whose reporters were kept out of press conferences, insulted on the cameras of other TV stations, and became something like pariahs in the city.

Still, the station moved into the investigative field vigorously. In the summer of 1968 it nailed another biggie. WDSU reported that the state attorney general was heavily involved in protecting a savings company which had gone bankrupt owing depositors some $3 million. Furthermore, much of the missing money had been loaned or given to firms controlled by politicians or members of the Cosa Nostra.

The attorney general was indicted and the scandal awakened WDSU's two main TV competitors, who promptly started their own investigative work.

At WWL, the CBS affiliate, the main man was Bill Elder. Recruited from the Cajun country, Elder introduced a gangbusters technique to television. Once he had prepared his case, Elder would walk into a politician's office with the camera and sound rolling behind him. As he popped his questions, TV audiences saw, in one instance, an official crawling under his desk to avoid Elder; and in two other instances men running out of their offices and down the hallway.

Although Elder's technique was criticized by his competitors—they called it "unfair" and "arrogant"—audiences loved it. He achieved so many →

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scoops, and his ratings improved so much, that one station temporarily dropped its news show opposite his and ran *Dragnet*.

But Elder's own station also has a Pollyanna to play against his thunderous Othello. She is Rosemary James, a soft-spoken woman originally from Charleston, S.C., who coos and smiles during her interviews but gets devastating results. She also has introduced something that is possibly unique to investigative reporting anywhere. She is nice to the Cosa Nostra. She showers them with Charleston charm. When a scandal breaks, she is often able to report the Cosa Nostra's views on the matter—just as one might report the other side's version in any story.

She confines her investigative work to the Cosa Nostra and to political personalities. In the latter regard she shares honors with the city's other top political specialist, Iris Turner Kelso of WDSU. Iris Kelso, too, is Southern, charming and soft-spoken, but two years ago she won the nationally prestigious Sigma Delta Chi award for her investigative series "A City in Crisis," a low-key report which exhaustively analyzed the city's problems and caused a number of quiet reforms.

If Rosemary James turns the Cosa Nostra on, however, WVUE's investigative reporter Richard Angelico drives them right up the wall, because Angelico had a close relative, now dead, who was an important member of the Mafia in New York and later in Texas. Angelico has been warned by some members of his family to go easy on "The Friends," and the Cosa Nostra has somehow managed to consider him a "traitor," which they've called him to his face—and on camera.

Undeterred, the 29-year-old Angelico has piled up a very impressive record—in terms of achieving the most exposes and causing the most governmental shake-ups. And he's been in journalism only four years.

When he left college, he went to work on the New Orleans docks as a clerk. There, he became curious about a man, 50ish and dressed always in a silk suit and alligator shoes, who every Thursday walked the length of the docks. He had a cane and he tap-tap-tapped. Fascinated, Angelico made inquiries and learned that the man was a Mafia loan shark and he used the tap-tap-tap of his cane to notify dock workers he was coming for payment.

Viewing that, and seeing dockside pilferage and other Cosa Nostra rackets, Angelico applied to WVUE for a job and asked to specialize in rackets reporting. He was hired and trained, and since then his exposes have run from massive corruption in the state education department to fraudulent bonds sold under the auspices of Baptist ministers.

The stations have not been entirely alone in the muckraking. Life magazine, in articles published in 1967 and 1970, played a primary role in awakening the state's press and public to the corruption. Newspapers? Well, they're unbelievable, except for the Baton Rouge Morning Advocate and the uneven performance of the New Orleans States-Item and the Shreveport Journal. Then, instead of newspapers, the aggressive day-by-day watchdogging necessary for reform has been done by the New Orleans TV stations. Why did they get involved? The three stations' news directors all offer pretty much the same answer: in cities where newspapers don't do their job, TV is convinced by public pressure that it must take over.

In summary, the investigative journalism of the three New Orleans television stations has had a massive impact on the state. It has created a climate of reform in a community historically apathetic toward corruption—a spirit of reform which was dramatically manifested in last November's elections and in the growing tide of convictions and indictments of public officials. (END)